

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1875 Century Boulevard/Suite 410
Atlanta, GA 30345
Phone: (404) 679-7289
Fax: (404) 679 7286
<http://www.fws.gov/southeast>

News Release



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Contacts: Rob Holland, USACE (404) 562-5011
Tom Mackenzie, USFWS (404) 679-7291

Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Announce Water Management Decisions and Actions on ACF & ACT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released its amended Biological Opinion on the “Exceptional Drought Operations” (EDO) proposed by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers for the Apalachicola - Chattahoochee - Flint River Basin. The Service also announced its concurrence with water management actions requested for the Alabama - Coosa - Tallapoosa River Basin.

The Service supports the key element of the Corps’ plan that does the most to increase storage in Lake Lanier and other reservoirs on the system, namely, the ability to capture and store water in the lake when the rains come to maintain additional water to guard against the effects of a continuing drought.

The Service also concurred with a second requested element reducing minimum flows required below Woodruff Dam, first dropping the minimum to 4,750 cubic feet per second (cfs) then to 4,500 cfs at Woodruff Dam later.

The Service determined that the Exceptional Drought Operations with minimum flows reduced to 4,750 cfs and 4,500 cfs at Woodruff Dam does not jeopardize the future existence of any of these species. The Biological Opinion gives the Corps the flexibility to reduce flows to 4,750 immediately.

The Service has been working closely with Corps for several months regarding impacts to listed species while it works to meet the needs of the many users of the ACF and ACT Basins during these extraordinary times.

“Working collaboratively with the Corps, this opinion relies on the best available science and data for its conclusions,” said Sam D. Hamilton, Southeast Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “The Endangered Species Act is flexible, and we have used that flexibility in a way that doesn’t risk extinction of the species. We are using adaptive management, so as new data becomes available and as conditions change, we are assessing the situation and adapting our management to best meet the needs of the many users of the system.”

“The Corps has begun these changes in operations today,” Gen. Schroedel said. “We will closely monitor conditions in the basin daily to assess how these operations are affecting both storage and endangered species. Our monitoring will help us assess what future operational adjustments are necessary.”

The modification provides for a pathway to increase composite storage – that is the amount of water stored at Lanier, West Point, and Walter F. George. If the Corps does not hold back some water now, and if extreme drought conditions continue, it is possible there may not be enough water in storage next summer to meet the needs of the users.

“We live here too, and fully understand what is at stake in the negotiation about how to allocate water,” Hamilton said. “As citizens throughout this basin, we are learning that choices have consequences and we cannot outgrow our carrying capacity, living beyond what our region’s natural resources can support.”

“While fish and wildlife conservation is only a small part of this balancing act, we approach our role seriously,” Hamilton said. “It is our responsibility to ensure these indicator species, which help us assess the health of the system, are given the best chance possible to ultimately thrive. The better they do, the better we will do. Because if this drought has shown us anything, it has shown us we cannot thrive as a citizenry on an unhealthy river system.”

The Service looked at the affects of the Exceptional Drought Operations on four listed species: Gulf sturgeon and three mussels: purple bankclimber, fat threeridge, and Chipola slabshell. The latter, Chipola slabshell, was included due to the requested EDO changes in the flows.

The species that is likely to be affected the most is the fat threeridge mussel, which could lose up to nine percent of its population. Over the last decade, this species appears to be producing fewer young individuals into the population. Repeated instances of mortality caused by low flows could represent a serious problem for the species in the future. For that reason, the Service is committed to work with the Corps and the states to develop a long-term plan.

“Right now, we’ve analyzed the Corps’ proposed action through June 1, 2008, because so much uncertainty exists about what might need to happen after that,” Hamilton said.

The Corps has indicated it will work quickly to identify criteria and triggers that may make it necessary to reduce flows to 4,500 cfs. The Service will continue to work cooperatively with the Corps reviewing monitoring data, hydrologic conditions, rainfall, and climate to define those triggers, and will make this information public as soon as it is available.

The Corps has agreed to come back into consultation with the Service as they determine what conditions would trigger a reduction to 4,150 cfs.

Background

In recorded history, there have only been a handful of days where flows of the Apalachicola River have been less than 5,000 cfs.

The river system is used for many municipal and industrial purposes, including power generation, flood control, navigation, drinking water, pollution dilution, agriculture, habitat conservation, and recreation.

Additionally, Apalachicola Bay in Florida requires fresh water to support people, wildlife, and the roughly \$200 million commercial and recreational fishery the Bay supports.

Alabama – Coosa – Tallapoosa River Basin

In a letter today to both FERC and Alabama Power, the Service agreed that returning flows to 1,600 cfs at the Jordan Dam immediately is part of the ongoing Endangered Species Act consultation. In addition, if FERC proposes to authorize those lower flows on an extended basis during the drought emergency, we have pledged to continue consulting on an emergency basis.

“We are concerned for the fish and wildlife resources in the ACT basin because Alabama is also under a severe drought,” Hamilton said. “This will help Alabama Power and FERC respond quickly to power generation needs while working with us to minimize affects to listed species.”

Alabama Power Company and FERC requested emergency consultation with the Service to meet an

urgent need to temporarily reduce flows in the Coosa River from the Jordan Dam by 20 percent (from 2,000 cfs to 1,600 cfs through December 1, 2007.)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. To learn more about the Service, visit www.fws.gov/southeast.

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